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The Connection between Type 2 Diabetes and Cholesterol

Don't get as much exercise as you should? Eat a lot of fatty foods? If you have Type 2 diabetes, take caution, because managing your cholesterol might be even more important than you think. Heart disease is responsible for the majority of diabetes-related deaths in America, and cholesterol is a major contributing factor.

Different types of cholesterol affect the body in different ways. Not all cholesterol is bad. Good cholesterol, also known as high-density lipoprotein (HDL), is created by the liver and is found in certain foods such as fish and beans. The body needs HDL to function properly. Other types of cholesterol can be harmful, such as low-density lipoprotein (LDL), which is found in foods high in saturated fat. LDL narrows and clogs the arteries. This is true for everyone, but because of the way diabetes changes certain substances in the blood, the condition can speed up this process. Research indicates that heart disease and stroke occur twice as often in people with diabetes.

Despite ample evidence to support the connection between diabetes, cholesterol and heart disease, many diabetics are not aware there is one. One study concluded that more than two thirds of diabetics do not see heart disease as a major complication of their condition. The same study found that 60 percent do not consider themselves at risk for cholesterol problems.

There are several ways to manage cholesterol levels. Three of the things physicians commonly recommend are:

- **Watch your diet** – Avoid foods high in saturated fat and cholesterol and seek out fruits, vegetables, poultry and foods high in fiber;
- **Maintain a healthy weight** – Being overweight increases cholesterol levels and is a risk-factor for heart disease; and
- **Exercise regularly** – Experts recommend 30 minutes of exercise five days a week, if possible.

If these changes do not lower cholesterol levels enough, certain prescription medications have been proven to help. These medications are most effective when combined with the suggested lifestyle changes.

In addition to the steps mentioned above, it's important to see your doctor to learn your cholesterol numbers and any other important information. Dr. Kathy Cubine, a Family Practice physician with Community Medical Associates reminds us to remember preventative medicine and regular check-ups work. She also adds, "As with all medical conditions, the earlier it is found, the easier it is to treat or reverse." Sometimes a simple blood test can provide life saving information.

People with Type 2 diabetes are not the only ones who should monitor their cholesterol. Studies suggest that as many as half of all Americans have elevated levels of cholesterol, and heart disease is the number one cause of death in the country. People more than 50 years of age, post-menopausal women and those with a family history of heart-related illness are especially at risk. Dr. Cubine acknowledged the importance of being familiar with one's family medical history, but also advocates personal responsibility. She believes, "Genetics play a large role in health, but lifestyle and habits play an even larger role – that is something we can all improve on."

It is best to maintain your cholesterol before it becomes a problem. Experts suggest men and women over the age of 20 should have their cholesterol checked once every five years. Contact your physician to schedule a cholesterol screening and discuss how your lifestyle choices affect your risk of heart-related illnesses.